DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 977 RC 011 349

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TITLE Traditional Values/Contemporary Pressures: The Conflicting Needs of America's Rural Women.
SPONS AGENCY Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.; Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.; National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Seminar (College Park, Maryland, 29-31 May 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Career Development; *Educational Needs; Employment Problems; Federal Programs; *Females; *Job Training; Needs; *Problems; Proximity; Rural Economics; *Rural Education; Rural Population; Rural Urban Differences; *Sex Role; Social Attitudes; Values; Womens Education

ABSTRACT

Rural American women number well over 25 million and represent all socio-economic and ethnic classifications, yet they share a conservative orientation towards sex roles and appropriate life styles, characteristic social and geographic isolation, and the dilemma of how to manage the traditional demands of rural culture and the contemporary pressures to enter the labor force. Rural women of all ages need locally available educational services including intensive literacy programs, job preparation programs (especially focusing on small business entreprenurial skills), and programs focusing on their rural values and heritage. They also need career planning to help with skills identification and development, and sensitive counseling regarding their problems Once trained, rural women need expanded and improved employment opportunities. The forceful implementation of existing federal policy could offset sex discrimination in public employment. Local education programs could help private employers reconsider their discriminatory practices. Finally, rural women need access to services, or to information and training that will help compensate for the lack of services. Federal policy can help by providing research on rural women, good educational programs based on rural strengths and values, and independent funding of rural and metropolitan programs. (SB)

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TRADITIONAL VALUES/CONTEMPORARY PRESSURES:

The Conflicting Needs of America's Rural Women

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Prepared for:
Rural Education Seminar
College Park, Maryland
May 29-31, 1979

Paper presented at the Rural Education Seminar, College Park, Maryland, 29-31 May 1979. Seminar sponsored by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Education, Office of Education's Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the National Institute of Education's Program on Educational Policy and Organization) and the U. S. Department of Agriculture (Science and Education Administration).

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The end of the twentieth century is a hard time to be a rural woman. It is not evident that there has ever been an easy time to be either female or rural in the United States, but contemporary society has contrived nevertheless to make its own unique contributions to the traditional difficulties country woman have faced throughout our history. The meager body of research data which has been gathered on the strengths and problems of rural women suggests that this group suffers all the hardships associated with rural life, all the difficulties which come with the woman's role in a traditional culture, plus some new pressures which have emerged from changing social patterns in our society during the last twenty years.

The unenviable status of rural women is not inevitable. The difficulties of country life can be ameliorated; the issues which affect women generally in our society can be approached in ways which will meet the particular needs of rural females. To begin this process, however, we must first come to understand the nature of rural women's specific needs, strengths and problems. Then, we must generate solutions to these problems that accord with the cultural values of rural life. This paper defines some of the most pressing problems of rural women, and suggests ways in which federal policy might lead to more appropriate fulfillment of their educational needs.

Who Are Rural Women?

Depending on what definition of rural one uses, there are

between 25.5 and 34 million* rural women and girls presently living in the United States. They represent a broad range of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, every possible social class, all levels of occupational and educational aspiration, expectation and achievement. Further, they face apparently different problems. The Iowa farm woman, worrying about the potential impact of inheritance taxes on the family farm is responding to a typical rural women's problem. So is the 20-year-old mother of three who fears for her mental health if she has to spend another New Hampshire winter cooped up in her trailer without near neighbors or regular transportation. So is an Appalachian mother with a chronically ill child, who must frequently find a way to get her youngster from her remote mountain dwelling to a medical facility 30 miles from home. So is a Spanish-American high school graduate who is faced with the choice between abandoning her dream of a professional career and violating the wishes of her family who want her to stay home and help with the younger children until she marries.

These women may appear to have more differences than similarities. In fact, however, they have more in common than the surface shows. First, rural women share a conservative orientation towards sex roles and appropriate life styles. Second, they share a set of characteristic problems which emerge from the daily realities of

* If rural is defined as "non-metropolitan," one-third, or 34,000,000, of the nation's women and girls live there. If it is defined as "open country and places with total populations less than 2500," the countryside is the residence of one-quarter of the female population, or 25.5 million, according to 1970 census figures.

country life. Third, they share a dilemma, how to manage both traditional demands of rural culture and contemporary personal and financial pressures to enter the labor force. To some extent, virtually all American women face this dilemma. But few urban or suburban women have ties to traditional culture so strong as rural women.

Rural Women: Sex-Role Orientation

Rural women tend to be family-oriented. They marry earlier than metro women, and are more likely to stay married*. They have more children, sooner, than their urban sisters, and are more likely to stay home during their child-rearing years. Rice and Beegle (1972) found that the traditional rural pattern of the home-bound mother with an emormous brood of children has broken down to some extent in recent years, as the fertility rate for rural women has declined precipitously. Even among young women, however, the rural-urban difference in child-bearing persists, which suggests that the strong maternal orientation of rural women remains strong.

Within the family, rural women perceive their appropriate roles in very traditional ways. As Flora and Johnson (1978:179) note, "the majority of rural women still conform to the traditional norms concerning woman's proper place: in the home, with the children, and supportive of her spouse's endeavors." Flora and Johnson (1978:174) also say that farm women often work side-by-side with their husbands, sharing in physical labor, the makir.g

* Unless otherwise noted, all statistics are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census data.

of decisions, and business management, believing "that such labor falls within the boundaries of the traditional female role of helpmate." Household management obligations are rarely shared, however, since as Clarenbach (1977:24) learned, "it was still regarded as unmanly or inappropriate for husbands to help in the house," in many rural parts of the country.

Even beyond the home, rural women are likely to hold traditionally conservative views. Rural people, in general, are more religious, more politically and morally conservative, and more likely to value hard work, conformity, and community interaction than are other residential groups (Larson, 1978). Women, as socializers of the young, are the keepers of the culture, and will speak strongly on behalf of preserving the values with which they were raised (Clarenbach, 1977:31-32). In many rural communities, women are the mainstays of the community institutions which maintain and transmit rural values: the churches, the Grange, the PTA and the 4-H Club.

Rural women find strength as well as limitations in their traditional roles. Flora and Johnson (1978:174) note that rural women can often depend on extended kinship networks which keep them from having to "face sex-determined tasks alone." Further, among farm women at least, the teamwork involved in economic survival has led to an apparent sense of satisfaction with women's equity as it is presently defined in our society. According to Larson (1978:98-99) "it is rural women who have the most positive perception of women's equality; nearly three-fourths believe

women get as good a break as men in the United States." He goes on to suggest that this may be why rural women are less in favor of ERA than any urban group; they appear to feel less need for legislated equity.

Rural Women: Problems Inherent in Country Life

A traditional orientation may offer a rural woman a sense of structure and security, but it does not relieve her of problems. Many of the difficulties rural women face emerge inevitably from the realities of country life. Isolation, both geographical and social, has been a persistent rural problem in this country since the earliest pioneers began to move westward. Geographical isolation makes access to services difficult; rural people cannot depend on public transportation, on readily available health services, on higher educational institutions within reasonable commuting distances. Social isolation breeds loneliness, a diminished sense of personal options, and, according to some observers, may give rise to alcoholism, spouse and child abuse, incest and suicide (Cochrane, 1977; Smith, personal communication, 1975). Finally, general population sparsity gives rise to small, relatively unspecialized communities with few job options, pushing some young people to migrate to more urbanized areas, pulling others into jobs whose primary appeal is simply that they are available.

These problems affect males as well as females, but they have special salience in women's lives. Women, as part of their home management duties, are generally required to gain access to

services; it is the mother, by and large, who take children to the doctor, the dentist, the clothing store, and to major school events. When these services are distant, and the mother has no transportation, it is generally her life which is made more difficult. Jo Goodwin Parker (1971:33) so poignantly remarks:

> ...there are health clinics. Yes, there are health clinics and they are in the towns. I live out here eight miles from town. I can walk that far (even if it is sixteen miles both ways), but can my little children? My neighbor will take me when he goes; but he expects to get paid, <u>one way or another</u>.

Similarly, when educational institutions are far away, and thus require additional expense, it is often the young woman who gives up college plans in favor of her brothers (Psathas, 1968). Schwarzweiler (1976) declares himself puzzled by the apparent inability of high school girls to turn their superior scholastic performance into college careers at the same rate as their male peers. It is less puzzling when one considers the constraints of traditional rural culture. If men are to be breadwinners and women helpmates, it makes sense to reason that remote educational resources should be allocated disproportionately to men, who will be able to translate schooling into higher income for their families. This, in fact, is just the line of reasoning which Psathas (1968) found among rural families. Obviously, cultural factors as well as geographic isolation come into play here, but the costs of distance often seems to include the sacrifice of female ambition.

Social isolation also has a greater impact on rural women than on rural men. When most of the rural population was engaged in

farming, many social needs were met by extended family life. Today, when approximately eleven percent of the rural population farms, social isolation has a disproportionate impact on women. When the young family needs a wage earner, and the wage earner needs a car, it is generally the wife who is left to struggle with relentless isolation and loneliness. According to Cochrane (1977:14):

> Social isolation is a problem for many rural families, particularly the women, and especially the home-bound mothers. Even the mothers with "wheels" complain of feeling isolated, and the lack of transportation perpetuates social isolation. There are many rural families immobilized except for the school bus or a sometimes-operating used work truck.

Even when transportation is available, it will not necessarily permit easy access to high-quality services. It is so difficult to get health professionals to serve in rural areas that the national Public Health Service has set up a special incentive program for future doctors willing to commit three years to a rural practice. Highly-prepared teachers seem to gravitate to town rather than country settings. Shopping centers with a range of merchandise and cut-rate department stores tend to locate in towns with a population large enough to support them, while the outlying districts make do with small, expensive stores with limited stock. As a result, the rural woman must travel long distances to find the resources readily available to the town dweller. As Cochrane (1977:13) notes:

> Generally, the limit that a woman can be expected to travel for services is 20 miles. However, rural women travel as far as 200 miles to obtain family planning services.

Reduced job options also affect rural women more than their male peers. The rural job market is limited and largely restricted to low-level jobs; even within those limitations, as Flora and Johnson (1978:169) point out, "rural life's occupational opportunities are largely for men." Women tend to be concentrated in clerical and service occupations characteristic of a highly gender-differentiated occupational structure. In the simple rural community, there is little choice for a woman who does not want to break through traditional occupational barriers. For this reason, among others, rural women are more likely to migrate to metropolitan areas than are their male peers (Thomas and Falk, 1978; Yoesting, Beal and Bohlen, 1968).

Rural Women: The Dilemma of Conflicting Pressures

In the past, the non-migrating woman generally married and settled into the traditional rural family pattern. This pattern is no longer so predictable. Country-dwelling women are moving into the labor market in increasing numbers. Rural women are not as likely to be employed as urban women, but they are working outside the home far more than they used to. A majority of non-farm rural women are in the labor force as are farm-dwelling women whose husbands have non-farm jobs. Only women who live on active farms (most of them part of farming husband-wife teams) are less likely to be employed than not, and even one-third of them now augment the family income with off-farm jobs.

These women are working for a variety of reasons. Some have adopted the central concepts of the women's movement, and look

to work for self-fulfillment and a measure of financial independence. One recent study found that female high school students in five rural regions of the country tend to look forward to working, both before and after marriage, as a source of personal satisfaction (Dunne, et al., 1978). Further, a substantial number of women seem to be quite aware of the long-standing limitations on job opportunities for rural females, and of some of the ways in which those opportunities can be expanded. When the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs held a series of rural "consultations" in several parts of the country, they found women asking for programs which would expand their knowledge of career options, for counseling on ways to break into non-traditional job markets, and for information on sex-discrimination and affirmative action laws (Clarenbach, 1977). While the women who attended these "consultations" probably did not represent a cross-section of rural females, they did indicate that a number of country women and their advocates are aware of the new possibilities for female employment and are willing to push for expansion of women's opportunities in rural areas.

This does not indicate, however, that the majority of working rural women are pulled from their traditional roles by the prospect of self-fulfillment through varied, well-paid, and interesting work. On the contrary, rural women tend to hold low-skilled jobs, at the bottom of the pay scale. In 1970, more than twenty-five percent of non-metro women were employed in non-

durable manufacturing (e.g., eviscerating chickens in a chicken-packing plant). According to Brown and O'Leary (1977:16), "the mean earnings of non-metro women in this industry group was $4,200. This compared with $5,000 for durable manufacturing and was one of the lowest average wages of any industry group." Since it is the rare woman who finds self-actualization in eviscerating chickens, it seems clear that a range of other pressures - inflation, family instability, a desire for a higher standard of living - are pushing the bulk of adult rural women onto the labor market.

These pressures, long associated with urban rather than country life, have been rising steadily in rural areas. As gas costs and Teamsters' salaries rise, the price of products which must be transported long distances from urban centers rises also, so that inflation has a disproportionate impact on sparsely populated areas. Further, the media and the interstate highway system have brought urban tastes to country people, and increased their desire for a plethora of mass-produced goods and services. Finally, according to Flora and Johnson (1978:170), "The normative climate regarding female sexual expression is slowly liberalizing, and the sanctity of the family is being challenged by a rising divorce rate." Thus, many rural women are entering the labor market for the same reasons as their urban sisters - to support dependent children, to acquire more of the world's goods, or to meet spiraling costs with a second income.

Unfortunately, the rising rate of rural women in the labor force (for whatever reasons) has not been accompanied by a change in rural values. As Flora and Johnson (1978:181) point out, there has been little "decline in the traditional view of the male as the superior sex, with most women's lives revolving around their men." Thus, rural women continue to cleave to their "helpmate" roles, expecting little assistance from their husbands in household and child care responsibilities. As Feldman and Feldman (1974:48-49) found, "Working women are different from men who work in that their employment brings on a second job, adding the 'male' task of provider to that of homemaker, wife, and mother."

Thus, rural women who work outside the home often find themselves in a nearly (or actually) unbearable situation. It is all too easy to find the rural wife who rises at 5:30 a.m. to make her husband's breakfast, pack his lunch and see him off to work, only to stay up to get the children off to school, to do the laundry, cleaning, cooking and sewing during the day so that she can be ready to leave the house at 3 p.m. to work an eight-hour evening shift at a factory, restaurant, or nursing home. Add to this schedule the normal problems of rural life - t[illegible]portation difficulties, inaccessible services, and a poor selection of job opportunities - and it is clear that the life of the working rural woman is hard indeed.

Flora and Johnson suggest that this disproportionate allocation of responsibilities stems from male reluctance to take on "femi-

nine" work. There is some evidence which suggests, however, that woman contribute to this inequitable situation. Stokes and Willits (1974) found rural women ambivalent in their sex-role attitudes, ready to say that equal work should earn equal pay, but adhering to the traditional belief that women are responsible for running the household. Similarly, the Dunne et al. (1978) study found rural high school girls more eager to work after marriage than their male peers would want their wives to be, but less likely to expect shared household responsibility than the boys professed themselves to be ready to offer.

This role ambivalence tends to lead to a rural version of the "superwoman" syndrome. Many country women attempt to work, to contribute to community life, to run a household by the standards of their farm-reared mothers, and to provide their children with more opportunities than they had for themselves. Some manage to make it work, and can legitimately be added to the roster of "Strong Rural Women" who have been glorified in the popular literature since the days of the pioneers. But others are just normal, ordinary people, who struggle to get through each day. It is hardly surprising that the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs found their "consultations" filled with stories of women desperate for help. It is only surprising that so little has been forthcoming.

The Needs of Rural Women

Direct provision of educational services should be the first step in helping rural women realize their own desires. These services

must be directed at mature women as well as girls in school. Adult women moving into the labor force, often for the first time in their lives, need skills development if they are to avoid being trapped in the lowest level, lowest paid occupations. Further, education for older women will have impact on the next generation. There is evidence which indicates that the mother's educational attainment level has an important influence on the occupational plans of her daughters (Falk and Salter, 1978), and that there is a strong relationship between the working mother's educational level and her children's tendency to sex-stereotype jobs (Dunne, 1979).

To begin at the beginning, rural women need intensive literacy programs. Cochrane (1976:9-10) found that, in New York state at least, sixty percent of the totally unschooled population was female, and that "in both farm and nonfarm areas there are fewer women than men who have had eight years of formal education." Since women are the primary socializers of children, the Cochrane report points out, "If literacy has not been the rural women's experience, it will not be the experience of her children. A dearth of literacy skills limits a rural woman's opportunity to obtain information in modern methods which would increase the economic productivity of her family and community." That is, both for herself, and because she has a pivotal influence on the attitudes and aspirations of her children, the rural woman needs literacy programs.

Other educational programs for rural women and girls should focus on job preparation. Clarenbach (1977) reports expressed needs for

courses in reducing sex role stereotyping, in long-term life planning, and in non-traditional career options, as well as specific vocational training. Since the simple occupational structure of rural communities provide few "natural" job openings, women also need to be taught how to identify markets which might exist in a given locality, and how to develop small enterprenurial enterprises to meet the needs of those markets. Given the appropriate skills and information, small business enterprises are a logical choice for rural women, who can often manage on a small profit margin while a business is starting, since they are frequently providing primarily a supplementary income to their families (Flora and Johnson, 1978).

Finally, rural women need educational programs which will teach them and their children about rural values and the unique aspects of their rural heritage. As Cosby and McDermott (1978) point out, rural people have lived too long with a negative and often derisive urban view of their lives. For women, who must live with the additional burden of being "mere females," this condition breeds self-doubt and low self-esteem. Clarenbach (1977:31) reports that women in various parts of the country expressed a desire for programs which would "focus on identifying those aspects of rural life which are important to people and then working to resist any further erosion of those aspects which 'urbanizing' brings." If the best qualities of country life are to survive the urbanizing pressures of the new out-migration from metropolitan areas (Beale, 1975), it will be because rural

people are as consciously prepared to fight for what they want to retain as the "new people" are prepared to push for what they want changed.

Programs in each of these areas are needed. But they will be genuinely beneficial to the majority of rural women only if they are available where the women are. Some rural women can and will travel many miles for educational services. But there are many others who find it impossible, either psychologically or physically, to make routine trips to a distant educational institution to learn what they need. Further, many women seeking to advance their education meet resistance from their husbands and families (Clarenbach, 1977; Cochrane, 1976). When transportation and lodging expenses are added to the existing negative pressures on women, education often becomes an impossible goal. Finally, when educational programs are brought to women in a given locality, they can be tailored to the specific needs of that group. Since rural people tend to be limited in their range of experience, and somewhat parochial in their world view, the more closely a program can be shaped to the particular strengths, needs, and situations of a particular rural group, the more likely it is to be successful.

Career Planning and Development Counseling

In addition to specific educational programs, rural women need access to counseling services which will enhance their ability to make and develop career choices. Because rural women have had little natural exposure to the range of role models and

occupational options common to urban residents, they need vicarious means of broadening their awareness. They need help in identifying their own skills, and in determining which new ones they want to develop. Finally, they need sensitive counseling to help them through the problems presented by the conflict between traditional pressures and contemporary desires to expand women's roles.

What they do not need are urban feminist programs which focus on consciousness-raising and militancy training. Many rural women, including some much in need of counseling, will reject out-of-hand anything that smacks of "Women's Liberation" as it has been described in the press. Many others have husbands who will reject it for them. Further, some of the more heavy-handed programs designed for rural women assume a common set of cosmopolitan values which, in fact, are alien to rural people. As one project director, at a 1978 Women's Educational Equity Act Program rural directors' meeting observed, "What I might perceive as a woman's problem to be solved, the woman might perceive as a value to be preserved."

Some programs are very sensitive to value differences between rural and metropolitan places and to differences in orientation among rural regions of the country. Others are not. The staff of one federally-funded program, which tried to do consciousness-raising among affluent farmers' wives in a Great Plains state, were irritated to find women more interested in estate-planning workshops than in rectifying their "downtrodden" state. The

potential consumers were evidently equally irritated to learn that they were supposed to be more concerned about having to ask their husbands for dress money than about the prospect of losing family land to inheritance taxes. This kind of urban-import program, especially presented by urban-import people, often does more harm than good.

Clarenbach's (1977:29) report offers a more promising model. The University of Wisconsin's Stout campus sponsored "a small but intensive peer counseling project, 'Women Helping Women,' which recruits and trains mature rural women to counsel other rural women." This program provides employment and skills training for some rural women who then provide others with counseling which takes into account the actual needs and conflicts country women face as they make educational and career decisions.

Expanded and Improved Employment Opportunities

Once rural women have been provided access to appropriate educational and counseling resources, they need to have access to the kinds of jobs for which they are preparing themselves. This will be no easy task. There are few jobs available in rural areas, and those which exist are often restricted to men by tradition or by requirements of physical strength which most women cannot provide. Federal job expansion programs which focus on the employment needs of rural communities are likely to help country women either directly, by creating more jobs within the traditional "female" sectors, or by offering more employment to men, thus easing the male grip on the available job pool.

But more needs to be done. Rural employers need to re-think long-standing practices which have discriminated against women. In the private sector, discrimination is well-known and pervasive. But even in the public, tax-supported employment, the pattern of sex bias is clear. For example, twenty-five percent of all agriculture majors are women. Discrimination begins to affect them in college, where they are generally channeled into either ornamental horticulture or companion animal care (Joyce and Leadley, 1977). Even those who resist this sex-biased sorting have trouble once they enter the job market. The Cooperative Extension Service virtually always hires women to teach women (primarily in the Home Economics field) and men to work with men. In 1977, there was only one female county agricultural agent in the nation. USDA milk inspectors are predominantly male, although there is no reason why trained women could not do that job.

Obviously, forceful implementation of existing federal policy could affect discrimination in public employment. To change private hiring practices, it might be advisable to create programs which would inform both employers and rural women about sex discrimination legislation and about affirmative action. Locally-based, locally-oriented programs which would transmit both information and strategic techniques to employable women would probably be the most effective way to create change in a rural community; such women would have more motivation and more credibility than would any group attempting to intervene from the outside.

Access to Services

Like restricted job opportunities, limited access to services is a problem for rural men as well as women. But, since women are most often left to cope with the difficulties of limited access, they are most likely to be ready to do something about scarce services.

Rural women need access to information and training which will enable them to attract, establish, or compensate for services which their own communities do not adequately supply. The need to learn, for example, how to lure health care professionals to rural communities; how to start local nursery schools and day care facilities; how to make up for the lack of discount supermarkets by setting up food-ordering cooperatives. There are rural communities which have managed successfully to do all of these things. If their experience can be communicated to others, it can be appropriately adapted to local needs.

The county agent model could be usefully employed here. A "women's resource agent" could serve as a link between local women's groups and national information sources. The resource agent could also help to create a national network of rural women, who might be able to help one another in the resolution of a wide range of problems. At best, such a program could help isolated rural women broaden their experience through contact with others; at the very least, it could begin to show rural women that they have a good deal in common, breaking down some of the regional barriers which have stood in the way of effective communication and political mobilization in the past.

General Implications for Federal Policy

Research Needs

The existing research on rural women is sparse, limited to a few regions, and widely varying in quality. As Clarenbach (1977) comments, "Lack of specific program concern for the needs of rural women is matched by - and thus obscured by - a lack of concern in data gathering." If high quality, adequately differentiated programs are to be created for rural women and girls, it will be necessary to know more about them, both as diverse groups and as females with common problems and concerns.

It will not be easy to find funding for such research. At present, most federal research interest lies with metropolitan problems, and it is difficult to find proposal reviewers who understand and sympathize with the needs of rural people. There are a few private foundations which have taken a special interest in rural research, but there are not enough of them to fund sufficient first-rate, fine-grained studies. If this research is to be done, the Office of Education will have to fund it.

Rural Set-Asides

If rural programs are always to be in competition with metropolitan ones, there will never be enough attention to rural womens' needs. Metropolitan places have problems which are more comprehensible to the metropolitan people who judge proposals and grant money; they have target populations which are, by definition, larger; and, generally, they have more money to pay for more effective "grantsmen." As Clarenbach (1977:35) says:

> Rural areas realistically require different eligibility criteria to qualify for educational programs. The rigidity of federal regulations with respect to level of income removes from eligibility some of the very people for whom programs are intended. And the "numbers game" of those educational institutions that provide outreach programs - only for a minimum number of enrollees - needs to be rethought so that policy will take into account the often great difficulties of meeting those requirements in isolated areas.

Sensitivity to Special Rural Qualities

If federal women's programs are to be launched without sensitivity to rural values and respect for rural life ways, country women will be better off without them. This is a strong statement, but not an imprudent one. For many years, reformers have gone out into the countryside armed with a powerful but erroneous assumption: that there is a cultural vacuum in rural America which good people should fill up with good urban ideas and good urban attitudes. Programs based on this assumption confuse more than they enlighten, and damage more than they build. Rural communities are fragile organisms; they have never had the need to develop the urban capacity to absorb "reform" without responding to it. Over the last ten years there have been several rural educational "improvement" efforts which have had serious deleterious effects on the communities they were intended to serve (Dunne, et al., 1978); it would be a pity if a federal effort added to the burdens of rural women instead of alleviating them.

Good programs for rural women will be based on the strengths of rural life and rural people - independence, self-sufficiency,

strong kinship ties, a genuine commitment to family life. Such programs will help rural women to work through conflicts between traditional values and contemporary needs without forcing them to sacrifice either in the name of some generalized construct of universal good. This will be no simple task, but it has been neglected far too long.

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